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WAR SONNETS

by

BENJAMIN COLLINS WOODBURY

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

"Life's battle is a conquest for the strong;
The meaning shows in the defeated thing."

—John Masefield.

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1918

To my brother overseas and to my sister in the service of the Red Cross.

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PROEM

"I think that these four qualities are indispensable in a great general—knowledge of military affairs, valor, authority and good fortune."

—Cicero.

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TEN HUNDRED THOUSAND MORE*

We are coming, Father Pershing, ten
hundred thousand more,
From eastward and from westward, from
the broad Pacific shore;
We leave our fields and offices, our
wives and loved ones dear,
With spirits full of courage, without
a single fear;
We dare to look behind us, nor dread
what lies before:
We are coming, Father Pershing, ten hun-
dred thousand more!

If you look across the house-tops that
fringe the western sky,
Swift darting flights of birdmen your
vision may descry;
And now the wind an instant pulls
Old Glory's veil aside,

*With apology to James Sloan Gibbons, author of "Three Hundred Thousand More," July 2, 1862.

And lo! a mighty argosy rolls on
in strength and pride,
And hosts with gleaming helmets all clad
in khaki pour:
We are coming, Father Pershing, ten hundred thousand more!

If you glance down hill and valley where
growing cornfields shine,
You may see our student army fast falling into line;
While juvenile Crusaders are learning the country's needs,
And thus with plough and spindle sow
not in words but deeds;
And for every home left vacant there
rise two martyrs more:
We are coming, Father Pershing, ten hundred thousand more!

You have called us, and we're coming,
by convoy o'er the tide,
To die if need in Flanders fields, our
brothers' bones beside,
And from the enemies of freedom to wrench
the dripping sword,
Or in the face of foreign foe to frag-
ments break the horde.
Ten hundred thousand men and more
as true have gone before:
We are coming, Father Pershing, ten hun-
dred thousand more!

"Justice we love, and next to justice peace."

—George Edward Woodberry.

SONNETS

"I am the death of Life,
I am the life of Death,
I am War! .. .. .
I am the death of Joy,
I am the joy of Death,
I am War!"

—Alter Brody.

WAR

Gigantic foe, whose armaments of steel
Bray forth; a lion straining at his chain
A demon in whose fever-maddened brain
Are captive all the host of commonweal;
The millions who the woe and horror feel
Of sabre thrust, the grief and biting pain,
The sacrifice of sons who die in vain,
The secrets of thy selfish soul reveal.

Ah, what an end to gain and what a price
Can peace prevail at such a bitter cost?
Oh, spare the pangs and cast anew the dice
Of horrid war; the day that's won or lost
The evils to the end thereof suffice;
Oh, save us, God, such needless holocaust!

"Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples.... We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances."

—President Wilson, to Congress, April 2, 1917.

NEUTRALITY

Neutrality! when in the face of fate
  Belligerents with overt acts conspire,
  Lay waste the land with battle's burning pyre;
When jingoists on justice fair would prate
On liberty and freedom of the state,
  Consumed by greed and passion's bitter ire,
  Insatiate with war and vain desire,
Shall we still to the end impartial wait?

The Lion rampant in his Island lair
  Is lifting loud his voice that war may cease,
The Eagle's darkling wing a truce doth wear,
  The Tricolor would seek a glad release
From wanton war; the face of the Great Bear
  Doth menace: hear, O Lord, our prayer for peace.

"Great God, whose path upon the deep
Is still unknown, but who didst keep
Thine ancient people, when the wind
And Egypt followed fast behind:
O hear us, when our prayer to thee
Ascends for those we love at sea."

—Stopford Augustus Brooke.

"The freedom of the seas is the *sine qua non* of peace, equality and co-operation."

—President Wilson.

AT SEA

As borne upon the iridescent waves,
To muse unmoved by ship's accustomed toss
Like steady rider on a dancing horse,
To ride the billows, o'er their crests and caves
Serene no matter how the wind behaves;
To dream, as beats the winged albatross
Upon the decks, and then to look across
The sky and think of countless sunken graves
Unmarked by cross, unkept by human hand;—
To think where skirts the changing distant shore
War reigns; while homeward where the hidden strand
Uprises, there is peace: let us implore
Dear God, may Thou at Thy supreme command
Decree that this great sin shall be no more!

"I must be cruel, only to be kind."
—Hamlet, Act. III, Scene iv.

ANACHRONISM

Across the skies where shone Hope's rising star
O'er loyal homes where innocence didst sleep,
Where faithful mothers anxious vigil keep,
The god of war has flung his shafts afar
In blood has writ his black anathema.
O'er land and sea his hostile armies sweep
While heaven's hosts in tearful silence weep,
And still uncrowned sits earth's New Avatar.

O bitter thought that in the heaven high
The sun of truth for which true martyrs bled,
Once more must rise o'er land where heroes die,
While hopes of peace howe'er remote have fled;
Great God! canst look with unrelenting eye,
While man reverts to savage traits long dead?

"Belgium may be invaded. The Belgian people will never be conquered nor crushed. The Belgian people cannot die. . . . Their soil, watered by the blood of millions of warriors, is the most fertile in Europe in the harvests of the soul."

—Romain Rolland.

TO BELGIUM

"OMNIUM FORTISSIMI SUNT BELGAE"

Not strength in arms doth make thy nation great
Thy greatness is in wealth of soul untold;
Not all thy kings, from stalwart Leopold
And William, silent, unintimidate,
In pure descent to Albert called the Great;
But fearless, with a courage dauntless, bold,
With spirit imperturbable of old,
Thy people constitute the perfect State.

Renascent Belgium, from the black remains
Of fallen cities, Ghent, Liege, Namur,
A newer sun shall blot away thy stains;
Thy country plundered, burned and pillaged sore,
Thy works of art, and beautiful Louvain,
From these grim ashes thou shalt rise once more.

"Kings and empires die, great ideas, once they are born, can never die again."

—H. G. Wells.

TO FRANCE

Brave scions of an ancient heraldry,
Land of the stalwart musketeer and lance
For long enwrapt in medieval trance;
But once from rule of Bourbon kings set free
Thy loyalty has swept from sea to sea.
Thy savants thy rich heritage enhance,
O beauty-loving, freedom-breathing France,
Undaunted in the cause of liberty.

For every son that dies for freedom's sake
Above the battle's black and bloody moil,
For every noble pinioned at the stake,
For every maid a servant of the soil,
A freeman sheds his blood to life partake
And blessed is to each his common toil.

"Who stands if England fall?
Who dies if England live?"

—Rudyard Kipling.

"To our great kinsmen of the West, my friends,
And the great name of England, round and round."

—Tennyson.

TO ENGLAND

Thou England, mother of a stalwart race
From out thine island womb in quick'ning birth
To rule in distant corner of the earth,—
America, thy child, whose form and grace
Thy visage bears, thine upright stature, face;
Though distant far, an alien from thy hearth
And prodigal, we bring our dearest worth
And at thy feet our loyalty we place.

O parent country, noblest of the great,
Land of the blooming hawthorn and the rose,
A kingdom from an ancient feudal state;
Land which the heart of true devotion knows
Thy people for their true redemption wait,
Upheld within the faith thy strength bestows.

"Do you not know that freedom is a noble and valuable thing?"

—Epictetus.

POLAND

TO S. de B.

Kingdom with heart that dreams of noble things
  Land where a captive royal legion cries
  A country without bound save air and skies,
Nation with deathless loyal voice that sings
A state to which truth's sovereign aegis clings;
  For every son that as an alien dies
  Above his mound shall three more faithful rise,
Before the plain where sleep thy buried kings.

Canst bind the prostrate Eagle where she lies
  Canst quench the flaming torch of liberty?
Nay: Poland's flag shall sweep across the skies,
  Kosciusko's eye will flash with victory
Again shall Sobieski's spirit rise,
  And then in thine own right shalt thou be free!

"The smile," they called her,—"La Sourire;"—

—Florence Earle Coates:
The Smile of Reims.

REIMS

Here rich, resplendent on its bright facade,
Where stately kings and priests of high renown
Once worshipped under sacerdotal gown,
Where grinning gargoyles on its transept played
And legion statues sat in pomp arrayed,
From flying buttress o'er the quaint old town
The sculptured Angel from her shrine looked down,—
Here Saint Remi and pagan Clovis prayed.

Now all is dust; where knelt Le Beau Dieu,
Where flashed the sun on jeweled wall its gleams
The smiling Angel weeps a bitter tear;
A million shells have burst in shattered Reims,
Seraphic is the face of "La Sourire,"
Within the magic city of our dreams.

"All wars end; even this war will some day end."

—John Masefield:
The Old Front Line.

THE OLD FRONT LINE

Upon its stalk the gilded statue stands
  At Albert town upon the Old Front Line,
  The Virgin and the Child, before whose shrine
The sad in Autumn's solitary bands
Made Pilgrimage to touch the sacred hands.
  A passing shot has bent the form divine
  Till downward, mute, the pitying eyes incline,
The Diving Angel thus the way commands.

When will she fall? for then the war will end
  The word has gone; for those who know no creed
But slavery and might and lust and greed,
  It matters not, for they in vain contend
With spirit; but the right will right defend
  Till death,—"they shall not pass" it is decreed.

"No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States."

—Washington's First Inaugural Address, 1789.

WASHINGTON

Acclaim him victor with the fronded palm,
  Upon whose brow the seal of state was set
  Within whose heart sits freedom throned yet;
His country safe from tyrant and all harm,
Immortal were his deeds; immortal charm
  The spell he cast; within his soul were met
  Soldier and gentleman: a nation's debt
Upheld, upborn upon his mighty arm.

Majestic leader, freeman to the core
  Across the flood, upon the bristling plain,
Undauntedly the flag of truth he bore;
  In vassalage may alien ne'er again
The nation bind, whose armor first he wore;
  His name we love, his glory ne'er shall wane.

"I believe that the true happiness of man consists in fulfilling the will of God."

—Count Leon Tolstoi.

TOLSTOI

Great servant thou who sought thy brother, friend
And kinship mid the humblest of birth,
Thou peasant-prince, yet simple child of earth
Who turned aside to duty's pathway wend,
Whose vision saw God's purpose in each end
The spirit's resurrection out of dearth;
Thou elder brother of the pauper, serf,
Noblesse oblige nobilities defend.

Not Russia's savant but the world's thou art,
Exponent of divine humanity,
Thy friendly face illumines palace, mart;
The herald of the truth that makes men free,
Life's dire wrongs the sorrow of thy heart,
Great prophet of the age that is to be.

"Honour has come back, as a king to earth, . . .
And we have come into our heritage."

—Rupert Brooke.

—"In his young eyes a sudden glory shone:
And I was dazzled by a sudden glow,
And he was gone."

—Wilfrid Wilson Gibson.

RUPERT BROOKE

Fair son of England, of true British mood
In whom the lamp of rising genius burned,
For freedom thou hadst ever yearned,
At peace or war, triumphant or subdued
Thou rose but higher; if from lesser feud
Life's greater lesson thou hadst never learned
And hatred to a higher purpose turned,
Then passion had thy gentle heart not wooed.

What meaneth life, except the soul aspire
To lofty heights, and climbing ever higher
Mid yearning song and sorrow's sober sighing,
At last to find amid its vainest crying
What thou hath found, and cometh ever nigher
The perfect peace thou findeth in the dying.

"Vive l'Amerique! Vive la France!
Vive la—Vive la France!"

—Percy Mackaye.

TO GREGORY

America, in youth's magnificance,
Thy sons embark upon the blood-stained wave,
Fearless in face of death and nameless grave,
Young, noble, true, daring the awful chance
Of war, les braves, les Corps des Ambulances,
Truest of true and bravest of the brave
Not life to take but human life to save,
For Papa Joffre, and fame, Somewhere in France!

Strong stalwart son, may the rich gifts so free
You give, thy faith so plenteous, so rare,
Symbols of nation loving liberty,
In every fortune that may fall to thee,
Bring hope to those opprest, this be our prayer
That God may keep thee safe from harm Out There.

"Aesculapius, son of Apollo.
By his skill he restored the dead to life.
His function was the art of healing."

—Classic Myths of English Literature.

THE CADUCEUS

Thou mystic wand of Aesculapius,
Which upright on a golden distaff gleams;
The emblem of the Priest and Medicus
A magic power hath o'er sleep and dreams.
The 'twined serpents and the winged rod
The mace, the snake, thy sons' insignia;
The herald's staff, the sceptre of the god,
Bright ensigns of the heavenly Messenger.
The Serpent, sacred symbol of the truth,
In ancient fane of Asclepiadae
Its life renews personifying youth;
Thus Wisdom clothes herself in deity.
Grant us, O god whose charm the dead can raise,
More skill to save,—and to thy name the praise.

"Thy country now is all humanity."
—G. E. Woodberry: Edith Cavell.

THE RED CROSS

A crimson Cross upon a field of white
Emblem of truth and man's humanity
Symbol of deathless love and loyalty;
Where'er thy flag is raised in freedom's fight
Whate'er the place, whate'er the time or plight,
To friend or foe alike thy fealty
Thy name the synonym of purity,
Beneath thy banner right shall conquor might.

Friend of the desolate and sore opprest,
On field or wave where honor of the sea
Is violate; against the bleeding breast
Of dying heroes thy red seal is prest
By some White Sister of sweet charity,
Who thus upholds thy sacred chivalry.

"War is a violent trade."

—Schiller.

"There are no neutrals in this war. . . . I have stood on Germany's side, I have walked in the valley of the shadow of neutrality, I have stood and now stand irrevocably with the cause of the Allies, which, thank God, is now the cause of America."

—Hermann Hagedorn:
Where Do You Stand?

TO HERMANN HAGEDORN

Not yours in language obsolete to sing
  Of distant days in tongue of Celt or Greek,
  Of ancient scenes, when preying on the weak
The strong survive, when emperor and king
Their broken arms against time's bulwark fling.
  But yours the message of the strong though meek,
  To brothers who for each and all must speak,
And to a world reborn allegiance bring.

The borders of that fatherland which hurled
  Defiance to the earth cannot command
The voices of those souls who thrilled the world
  To quietude. Lo! Schiller speaks, and grand
The voice of Kant: the flag of peace unfurled
  Shall bear a sign all men can understand.

"I have gone sometimes by the gates of Death
And stood beside the cavern through whose doors
Enter the voyagers into the unseen."

—Alan Seeger.

GONE EAST

Into the Sunset's golden glow—gone West,
Brave souls; from pain and battle din releast
For them the awful wrack of war hath ceast—
They sleep; yet at the purple dawn's behest
They rise to seek afar the soul's fair quest,
Earth's wisdom gained, in heaven's sight increast.
But some from out the West rose-hued go East
Into the Morn, the lovliest and best.

For East is West and West is East, afar
Envisaged in the light eternal glow
The crystal Sun's celestial rays which are
Reflected in each form, through aeons flow.
Beyond the blue there gleams a silver star
Each voyager shall sense and glimpse and know.

"Lafayette, we are here."

—General Pershing.

"What could be so incredible, as for a Roman knight to celebrate a second triumph . . .?"

—Cicero.

LAFAYETTE

Let us thy name, thine honor, ne'er forget
The loyalty of thine oppressed state
The simple token of thine high estate;
Thou, who, when fast the tide of battle set
Against America, held firm: still yet
For France a glorious liberty as great
Shall come to pass; for her a happy fate
Vouchsafed by us who pay the priceless debt.

We come to place a wreath upon thy bier,
And homage pay to none more great save one,
And he alone—our peerless Washington—
From Cantigny, Chateau Thierry, La Fere
To finish thy great task so well begun,
A spirit moves,—Our hero, "We are here!"

"The supreme test of the nation has come. We must all speak, act and serve together."

—President Wilson, Message to the American People, April 15, 1917.

THE MEN WHO STAY AT HOME

Prosaic souls, for them who stay at home
A host of cares, a modicum of praise
And just the round of solitary days;
For them no Marne, no St. Mihiel, no Somme,
But weeks of weary toil at plough or loom;
To keep alive tradition's sacred ways
To keep the heart unsullied that still prays
For peace, when restive spirit fain would roam.

The call to arms means not the field for all
The will to serve may bind the swiftest feet,
While duties faithful done both great and small
The fatal day and issue may defeat.
And to the Victors and to those who fall
May make the cost of sacrifice more sweet.

"For such as this men die, nor hesitate."

—Maxwell Struthers Burt: The Land.

VICTORY

Defenders of the nation's faith all hail!
On distant sea or shore and far afield,
Against the enemies of peace rough-steeled,
You falter not; neath battle's brunt nor quail,
Outnumbered oft, know not such word as fail.
Beneath your thrusts the flagging foe must yield,
Laon, Cambrai, Saint Quentin's bloody field,—
Before such odds can right alone prevail.

In foreign land, amid the toil and heat
Of battle, as with strength of arms and speed
The foe you hurl in rout and full retreat,
When tide of war ebbs hot, if you who bleed
But feel the flush of triumph more complete,—
Then death itself were victory indeed!

"There shall be established a League of Nations, associated under specific covenants, which shall guarantee the political independence and territorial integrity of large and small nations alike, henceforth."

—From America's Peace Terms, as outlined by President Wilson.

TO GERMANY IN DEFEAT

What profit thinkest thou to still contend
In bitter conflict for false ends begun,
Dost cherish still a place within the Sun?
Why longer with thy weakened arms pretend
To dictate to those forces which defend
The rights of man; the spirit of the Hun
Must first be vanquished e'er the cause be won,
E'er thou again deserve the name of friend.

Canst hope the hand of unrelenting fate
Which sets its tragic seal upon the scroll
Of time, will blot away the bloody toll,
The awful sins of thy despotic hate,
If thou build not an Independant State;—
What profiteth, except to save thy soul?

"Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer,
and the battle flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World."

—Tennyson.

"And in a league of Peace—God grant we may—
Transform the earth, not patch up the old plan."

—Robert Bridges.

"America is thinking beyond wars."

—H. G. Wells.

OUR COUNTRY

Our country is the world, and day and night
America in loyalty to thee,
To those at home and those across the sea,
Wherever war has left its awful blight
Where'er thy sons 'neath freedom's banner fight,
Our hearts we pledge to man's democracy
Our souls we pledge to God's theocracy,
Till right hath triumphed o'er inglorious might.

Where liberty is not, to make men free
Our lives we give, our fortunes, and afar
Thy legions flung to lands beyond the sea,
Amid the darkling clouds of war thy star
Shall light the shining path to victory,
One country and one world, America!

"I know that He will come for me to-morrow."

—From "The Comrade in White."

THE PERFECT WAY

What miracle, amid the throes of war
When hostile armies clash in battle peal
As votaries before the gods of steel,
Where cruel cold and hungry vultures claw
And nations each another's vitals gnaw;
As rising from the altars where they kneel,
And seeing could but fathom what they feel,
Would not each soul transfixed be in awe?

If from the Cross whereon He lowly hung
The bleeding Christ amid the hell be flung,
Before the foe all naked midst the fray;
Would not each host its silent arms reverse
Would not a prayer ring out for every curse,
And peace not war become the perfect way?

"Make no more giants, God,
But elevate the race at once!"

—Browning's Paracelsus.

"How will it seem when Peace comes back once more,
After these desperate days of shattering pain?"

—Charles Hanson Towne:
How Will It Seem.

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THE COMING RACE

What promise hath the future for the race
  What balm to soothe the troubles of this age,
  Will history but turn another page
Red-hued, which time alone can scarce erase?
Or will the patient years the scars efface,
  The child of earth attain his heritage
  The mediocre man become the sage,
And each his brother welcome face to face?

Above the battle's din, beyond all wars
  The stricken cries of souls in slavery
Arise; and loud and clear the one pure cause
  Of freedom and the rights of liberty:
Grant us, O God, a brotherhood of laws,
  Where men unite to serve humanity.

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